THE ZERO DRAFT: STEPS FORWARD AND BACKWARD SINCE THE REPORT OF THE OPEN WORKING GROUP

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The first section of the Zero Draft displays a structure that is more coherent and orderly than the introduction to the Open Working Group (OWG) report. The division into 8 subtitles (Introduction, Our Commitment and Shared Principles, Our World Today, Our Vision, The New Agenda, Implementation, Follow-Up and Review, and A Call for Action to Change the World) makes it possible to distinguish the member states' vision, their level of ambition and, therefore, their political approach more clearly than was the case with the OWG report. This new document is more clearly explicit about the tacit agreements, as well as the points of view about crucial issues such as the development model and the environment, the leading role given to the business sector and the significance that the Agenda carries for member states in terms of commitments and obligations.

The first section of the Zero Draft, which comprises 44 points (pp. 2-7), displays a structure that is more coherent and orderly than the introduction to the Open Working Group (OWG) report, which only has 18 points (pp. 3-5). The division of these 44 points into 8 subtitles (Introduction, Our Commitment and Shared Principles, Our World Today, Our Vision, The New Agenda, Implementation, Follow-Up and Review, and A Call for Action to Change the World) makes it possible to distinguish the member states' vision, their level of ambition and, therefore, their political approach more clearly than was the case with the OWG report. This new document is more clearly explicit about the tacit agreements, as well as the points of view about crucial issues such as the development model and the environment, the leading role given to the business sector and the significance that the Agenda carries for member states in terms of commitments and obligations.

Level of ambition

The Zero Draft takes up some of the ideas and even repeats phrases verbatim from previous documents such as the OWG report and the High Level Panel report, giving the impression of being fully consistent with those documents. A more detailed analysis, however, shows that there are important changes of meaning and policy orientation in the Zero Draft that scale down the Agenda's level of ambition.

Vision and Challenges

In terms of vision and challenges, paragraph 15 of the Zero Draft, entitled "Our vision," is one of the most interesting. This is because one of its most important steps forward, compared to the OWG report, is its progressive language, as reflected in the vision statement about "a world of universal respect for human rights" or the explicit mention of the need to remove all barriers to the empowerment of women and girls.

However, this paragraph is not consistent with the tone in the rest of the document. In many other paragraphs, the Zero Draft represents a step backward from the OWG paper. This is evident in the challenges it identifies as facing the world today.

The Zero Draft repeats verbatim the phrase from paragraph 2 of the introduction to the OWG report, which states: *"Poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development."* The OWG report, however, explicitly reiterates the commitment made in the outcome document to "freeing humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency," while the Zero Draft, in paragraph 3, follows

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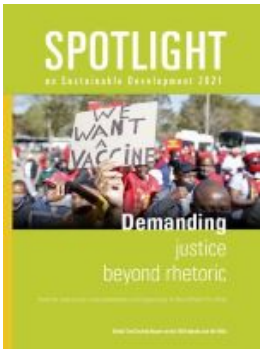

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the phrase just quoted with terms such as “intend” to put an end to poverty and hunger. Thus, the apparently strong and decisive phrase “once and for all” is qualified by the verb “intend” that precedes it. Consistent with this, the paragraph ends with a similarly “aspirational” and weakly determinative phrase, expressing the willingness to “create conditions” for “inclusive and sustained economic growth and shared prosperity,” but not for sustainable development. Thus, the Zero Draft presents a lower level of ambition and determination than the OWG outcomes document, although it should be pointed out that the latter already suffered from a series of limitations in terms of ambition, which were identified at the time by civil society. The wording of paragraph 3 of the Zero Draft sets the tone that is reproduced, with few exceptions, throughout most of the 44 paragraphs. This tendency is already evident in paragraphs 4 and 5.

No-one left behind?

Although paragraphs 4 and 23 of the Zero Draft include the striking phrase “nobody will be left behind,” which can also be found in paragraph 17 of the OWG report as “to ensure that no one is left behind,” in paragraph 4 of the Zero Draft the phrase seems to have a different meaning. Now, it seems to refer less directly to the need to place emphasis on improving the situation of less advantaged groups and increasing their participation in the development, implementation and results of the Agenda. In contrast to the positive affirmation and emphasis on people living in poverty that the phrase “no one left behind” means for civil society and in paragraph 17 of the OWG report, the Zero Draft proposes a new meaning that seems to show that the aim of the Agenda is to improve the lives not just of the poorest but of “all economic and social groupings” (see paragraph 4, p. 2). Evidence of this can also be found in the reference in paragraph 3 to “inclusive and sustained economic growth and shared prosperity.” If would be pleasing to imagine that the term “shared prosperity” implies that the wealthiest are going to share the benefits they have hitherto reaped from the current social and economic order with the least prosperous. But the implied meaning in the Zero Draft seems to indicate that, in the best case scenario, the wealthiest should benefit from the Agenda just as much as the least privileged and, furthermore, that the prosperity of the former will trickle down to everyone else, which all too often is not the case. The phrase “No one must be left behind” appears again in paragraph 23, but it refers solely to the universal coverage of health services rather than the Agenda as a whole.

This marks a substantial shift away from the vision and expectations of civil society organisations and the most impoverished groups regarding the Agenda, given that the huge benefits enjoyed by the most prosperous sectors of society are often what cause and/or maintain the impoverishment and defencelessness of the majority. This is the reason why civil society had hopes that this Agenda would make it possible to hold them accountable and place limits on their benefits and their individual wealth, in view of the consequences it has for the rest of society and the global environment.

In seemingly progressive terms, paragraph 7 proposes to “free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet for future generations.” Nevertheless, by giving poverty a status that is to some degree independent of human actions and responsibility, especially the actions and responsibility of the most powerful, the Zero Draft avoids mentioning the causes of poverty and the agents that bring it about or make it worse in many local contexts and settings around the world, where the people affected find it impossible to get their voices heard and the interests of big business prevail with the acquiescence of governments.

Likewise, while the OWG report stated in paragraph 4 that people are “at the centre” of sustainable development and mentioned the promise to strive for a just, equitable and inclusive world and work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, not on its own or separately but together with social development and environmental protection, in order to benefit all, particularly the most vulnerable groups, paragraph 7 of the Zero Draft has a different tone which suggests that this is an agenda “for” people, the planet and prosperity. Once again, the question is: Whose prosperity? Prosperity for whom? But there are also questions about the agency of the poor, who, with the conjunction “for”, are no longer presented as being “at the centre” but rather as some kind of passive “recipients” of the Agenda. This limits the real participation that those who experience poverty in their day-to-day lives can have in defining and implementing the Agenda. This demand for and promise of participation was what gave meaning and purpose to civil society’s involvement ever since the High Level Panel was preparing for its global and regional consultations. Now, not only is this participation absent from the 44 paragraphs of the Zero Draft, it has been replaced by increased agency for the business sector, which is awarded a leading role.

Means of implementation and the “Business sector”

Previously, the OWG report stated in paragraph 14 that implementation of the

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SDGs would depend on a “global partnership for sustainable development,” with the “active engagement” of Governments, civil society, “the private sector” and the United Nations system. Now, paragraph 7 of the Zero Draft affirms that implementation of the Agenda will be carried out by “all of us” in a “collaborative partnership,” sidelining civil society actors (including the poor) and downgrading their importance in the work to implement the Agenda.

Although in paragraph 14 the OWG report distinguished the private sector from civil society, it did so in generic terms, without referring to the former as the “business sector” or mentioning it again in the entire text. The Zero Draft, in contrast, mentions the “business sector” specifically in paragraphs 25, 30, 37 and 43, while maintaining the term “private sector” in paragraphs 36, 37, 39 and 43, though with the same meaning and importance. The frequent appearance of the term “business sector” in the Zero Draft goes hand in hand with its apparently pre-eminent role in the implementation, monitoring and review of the Agenda. In all the paragraphs just mentioned, the “private business sector” precedes civil society and ordinary citizens, giving the impression of reducing the agency of the poor and civil society and increasing that of the business sector.

It could be argued that the place assigned to the private sector, coming immediately after the role of governments or international institutions and over and above civil society, implies that it has a greater burden of responsibility, given its influencing capacity or the impact of its actions and interests at the global and local level. There are, however, doubts about that. With the exception of paragraph 25, which says that governments, international organisations, “the business sector” and other non-state actors and individuals “must” contribute to bringing about sustainable consumption and production patterns, nothing is said about holding the business sector accountable or regulating the impact of its actions on the economy, the environment or the collective rights of communities affected by its investments.

Furthermore, the document also gives pre-eminence to the “business sector” in funding the Agenda’s implementation, with an emphasis on private sector resources in the means of implementation (paragraphs 30, 36 and 37). However, it does not mention accountability or conditionality to prevent this funding from having adverse effects as a result of the drive to make a profit or obtain commercial benefits.

Linked to the means of implementation, one aspect that is absent in the Zero Draft’s introduction is a reference to national taxes as a means to enhance countries’ internal revenue-collection capacities. The lack of precision on this aspect ought not to lead to government actions that place a greater tax burden on the poorest families. Instead, what is required are progressive fiscal policies that help to reduce inequality, promote consumption by the poor and levy taxes on wealth, profits, the property and the inheritance of those who have the most, including the “business sector.”

It is known that these issues will be dealt with at the Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa, where civil society will seek to achieve greater clarity and transparency regarding the role of the business sector and governments in the financial means of implementation, with the aim of ensuring that the agreements establish safeguards against adverse effects that deepen inequity, inequality and economic injustice.

Space for national policies

Regarding the level of commitment and the extent to which the Agenda is obligatory for states, the OWG report and the Zero Draft both indicate that it is aspirational and global in nature. This implies that governments will set their own targets, guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances and realities (OWG 18, ZD 2). One aspect that is present in target 17.15 but highlighted in paragraph 19 of the Zero Draft is respect for national policies and priorities and providing “adequate policy space for economic growth,” particularly for developing countries.

This aspect ought not to be understood by governments, especially those in developing countries, as giving them carte blanche to promote economic growth at all costs, to the detriment of the collective territories of indigenous or rural communities as well as protected areas. This is especially important because, as the text itself indicates, implementation of the Agenda should abide by international law, including the human rights treaties.

In relation to these concerns, the Zero Draft uses a different language to the Open Working Group with regard to the subject of the environment. While paragraph 11 of the OWG report refers to the need for social equity and “the protection of the environment,” the Zero Draft uses the term environment in a more generic sense closely linked to addressing the effects and consequences of climate change and environmental degradation at the global level (12, 27 and 30). In fact, the term used most often in the Zero Draft is “planet,” reinforcing the idea of addressing the consequences of climate change and environmental

degradation at the global level and giving lesser importance to environmental protection and conservation measures. With the use of the term “planet” rather than “environment,” and the definition of global actions aimed at addressing consequences, together with the wider policy space awarded to national governments, the need for national and local actions to protect the environment is given less importance and national responsibilities to protect and preserve the environment are not even mentioned. This is particularly important in developing countries where the discourse of economic growth and national development is presented as a justification for taking forward development projects – infrastructure and natural resources exploitation – that have a serious environmental impact. Against this, it seems necessary to reach a better definition of the meaning of the words used in the Zero Draft so that they include the responsibility of states to respect environmental norms and rights aimed at safeguarding them. In this sense, it is striking that the expression “Mother Earth” and the acknowledgement that some countries recognise the rights of nature in the context of the promotion of sustainable development, which appear in paragraph 9 of the OWG report, have been left out of the Zero Draft.

Gender and women’s rights

One aspect to be valued in the Zero Draft is the stronger and clearer language regarding gender which can be found in paragraphs 15, 18, 22 and 23. This includes promoting equal opportunities to access education and employment for women, and combating all forms of gender-based discrimination and violence against women and children, both girls and boys (18, 22). Likewise, the proposal includes reducing maternal and child mortality and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health, including education and information on family planning. This wording leaves out the subject of sex education and sexual and reproductive rights, reflecting what happened in the process of negotiating the OWG document. Therefore, one task for civil society will be to attempt to reintroduce the debate on these important issues at the international and national level.

This greater clarity in the language and the emphasis on gender equality, giving it one specific paragraph (18), represents an important step forward from the OWG text, which did not include a specific paragraph (mentioning the subject in paragraphs 7 and 11). Even so, it will be important to work to ensure that this wording is maintained in the final draft.

Finally, it is noteworthy that paragraph 15, on the Agenda’s vision, includes the idea proposed by civil society that “every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality” and especially that “all barriers to their empowerment in our societies have been removed.” The reference to removing the barriers that obstruct women’s empowerment was not included in the OWG document and it therefore represents an important step forward that will make it possible to address both recurrent obstacles and new ones that are emerging in the spaces that women have started to occupy. One example is the political arena, where women’s increased presence is coming up against new problems such as political harassment and even violence; another is the labour market, where women consistently get paid less than men. This is why it is important for civil society to continue working not only to maintain the reference to removing the gender barriers but also get it included in the goals and targets.

The link with human rights and their importance for demanding fulfilment of the SDGs

From the perspective of civil society and the organisations that represent people living in poverty, it is necessary to pay attention both to the Agenda’s links with human rights and to the obligations and commitments that arise from the global agreement that the Agenda represents. The Agenda could be understood as a plan with its respective roadmaps and deadlines, whereby in the course of the next 15 years the global community implements the measures required to enable the poor to exercise their rights which are so often ignored and infringed by states. In a practical sense, the link with human rights provides civil society and impoverished groups with a series of legal and political tools with which to demand that states fulfil the Agenda. Thus, the stronger that link is, the more it will be possible to demand and achieve compliance with the Agenda.

The OWG report only made reference to human rights in paragraph 7, offering a list specifying various economic, social and cultural rights together with civil and political rights such as the right to development, the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food and water, good governance, the rule of law, gender equality and women’s empowerment, and a commitment to democratic societies. Without including such an exhaustive list, it is noteworthy that the Zero Draft makes a more extensive reference to human rights and international laws in paragraphs 11, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 28.

Here, important links are established with human rights standards and obligations by stating that the vision of the states involved is to achieve “a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity” (15); that the Agenda is “grounded”

in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments (11); that it encompasses all human rights (17), and that member states “reaffirm their commitment” to international law and emphasise that the Agenda will be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the “rights and obligations” of states under international law.

With regard to this, paragraphs 13 and 14 acknowledge that the tasks of eradicating poverty and inequality, preserving the planet and creating inclusive economic growth are linked to each other and interdependent. This is the reason why they have “decided on a set of integrated and indivisible goals” whose scope is universal. Thus, it is noteworthy that the characteristics assigned by the Zero Draft to the SDGs are very similar to the principles of universality, indivisibility and interdependence usually attributed to human rights.

Following the lead of the Secretary General’s December 2014 Synthesis Report, the Zero Draft takes a notable step forward in recognising the Agenda’s link with human rights. Ideally, this will expand the possibilities for civil society and impoverished groups to demand that states implement it adequately and to hold them accountable, using the social, political or legal enforceability tools that are usually applied in the field of human rights.

Despite this important pronouncement about the integrated nature of the Agenda, the logical implication that “no goal shall be considered achieved if the rest are not,” meaning that none of the goals will be left behind, is absent from the wording of the Zero Draft. The omission of this important step towards an undertaking on the part of states to implement the Agenda in its entirety, a point on which civil society has been arguing forcefully, obliges us not only to insist on getting it included in the final text but also to preserve and strengthen the link between human rights standards and SDGs in the final phase of negotiating the agreement, as well as during the process of implementation at the national and international level.

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Notes:

1 Open Working Group proposal on Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: **http://undocs.org/A/68/970**

2 One example of the OWG report’s lack of ambition is the figure of US$ 1.25 per day (just US$ 37.5 per month) as the threshold below which poverty is measured. This figure has been much criticized in Bolivia because, in Bolivian civil society’s view, it is much too low, considering that a minimum monthly basket of food in a country like Bolivia costs US$ 258 (Bs. 1792). It is difficult to think of any country, however poor, where it is possible for a person to live on less than US$ 40 per month. Given that Goal 1 lays the foundation for the entire SDG proposal, a figure as low as this for classifying people as poor indicates that the Agenda’s proposed horizons are anything but ambitious.

3 People with low incomes, women, children, older people, indigenous peoples and minorities, migrants, people with disabilities and the poor in the most vulnerable geographic areas, etc.

4 The road to dignity by 2030: ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet. Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Part I. A universal call to action to transform our world beyond 2015. Available at:

http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/files/2015/01/Synthes...

5 Unión Nacional de Instituciones para el Trabajo de Acción Social – Bolivia. **www.redunitas.org**

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